Embodying, academics, and the audit culture: a story seeking consideration
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Qualitative Research 2007; 7; 521
DOI: 10.1177/1468794107082306

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://qrj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/7/4/521
ABSTRACT  In response to the plea by Pelias (2004) for a methodology of the heart, this article presents a story about the embodied struggles of an academic at a university that is permeated by an audit culture. It is based on informal interviews with academics at various universities in England and selected personal experiences. Thus, the constructive process is inspired by partial happenings, fragmented memories, echoes of conversations, whispers in corridors, fleeting glimpses of myriad reflections seen through broken glass, and multiple layers of fiction and narrative imaginings. Methodological issues abound in the telling and showing but, quite rightly, remain dormant on this occasion. In the end, the story simply asks for your consideration.

KEYWORDS: audit culture, embodiment, fictions, narrative imaginings, personal experience

Introduction

Policing is always about bodies, though, isn’t it? It’s not just about ideas, but about people. (Richardson, 1997: 148)

In recent years, according to Ronald Pelias (2004), a crisis of faith has appeared in academic circles as a growing number of faculty members have discovered that the university life they chose was not what they expected or bargained for:

They were teaching students who seemed more interested in grades than learning. They were working for administrators who seemed more concerned with the bottom line than quality education. They were going to endless meetings that didn’t seem to matter, writing meaningless reports that seemed to disappear into the bureaucracy, and learning that service seemed to have little effect on others’ lives. Productivity was the motto of the day, so they published article after article that no one seemed to read, particularly those who were the focus of the study. They wrote piece after piece on social issues, but none seemed to make any difference. They researched topics that got them promotion and tenure but seemed removed from who they were. They felt empty, despondent, disillusioned. They felt spiritually and ethically bankrupt.
Then some scholars began to recognize that the emperor and, for that matter, they themselves were wearing no clothes. They started to question why university life had to be that way, why they had to be removed from their work, why only certain forms of discourse counted as knowledge, why they didn’t feel more connected to those they studied, why their mind should be split from their body, why they had to keep their emotions in check, why they could not speak from the heart. (pp. 10–11)

In such circumstances, Pelias (2004) makes a plea for a *methodology of the heart* that is located in the researcher’s body, ‘a body deployed not as a narcissistic display but on behalf of others, a body that invites identification and empathetic connection, a body that takes as its charge to be fully human’ (p. 1). This kind of methodology, he suggests, calls for a different space: ‘They collect in the body: an ache, a fist, a soup. They ask for your consideration’ (p. 11).

In response to this plea, here is a story that seeks to speak from the heart about the embodied struggles of a composite and mythical (perhaps?) academic at an imaginary (perhaps?) university in England that is permeated by an audit culture. It is based on informal interviews with academics at various universities in England and selected personal experiences. Thus, the constructive process is inspired by partial happenings, fragmented memories, echoes of conversations, whispers in corridors, fleeting glimpses of myriad reflections seen through broken glass, and multiple layers of fiction and narrative imaginations. In the end, the story simply asks for your consideration.

**And the lesson today is how to die**

‘Have you read the paper yet?’ asked Laura.

‘No. Why?’ Jim responded as he finished off the cheap bottle of red wine that he was drinking far too much of lately.

‘It says that Bob Geldof is organizing another load of concerts around the world on July 2nd.’

‘What, like a Live Aid anniversary party 20 years on?’

‘I don’t think so. This is different. He’s calling it Live 8. Something about putting massive pressure on the leaders of the G8 when they meet in Gleneagles to eradicate poverty in Africa.’

‘You like him don’t you Dad?’ chimed in Jacob, their 10-year-old son.

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Do you like him more than you like Mohammed Ali?’

‘Jacob. He’s a singer not a boxer,’ declares Rachael gleefully. The typical 14-year-old, always ready to triumph over her younger brother.

‘So what do you know about him then Miss Know It All?’ Jacob fires back.

‘Well, if you must know. He’s got an Irish accent, he married a woman who died from a drug overdose, his kids have stupid names like Fifi, his clothes are awful, his hair is terrible, he’s in an ancient band called the Boomtown Rats. And, he swears almost as much as Dad.’
Laughter erupts around the dining table. Almost in unison, Rachael and Jacob exhale their regular phrase, ‘Thank you for a nice meal. Please can I leave the table?’ Knowledge that nothing can compete with the Simpsons on TV, nods of assent are given by both parents.

As the noise of the children stampeding for the front room recedes, Jim glances out into the garden. The window in front of him shimmers and then melts. Into focus comes the image of Bob Geldof, singing *I don't like Mondays* on July 13th, 1985 at Wembley Stadium in London. It’s the Live Aid concert.

As the words _And the lesson today is how to die_ leave his lips, they hang in the air. Jim stares at the TV, transfixed, enveloped in the moment, the stillness. Bob stands stock-still. Hand raised above his head. Fist clenched in unconscious salute. Stiff with purpose. Eighty thousand people stand in front of him. Another three billion watch worldwide. As Geldof wrote in his 1986 book *Is That It?:*

Together we held our breath... Throughout Africa on this day people were starving. And, for me, at this particular moment, the threads of a lifetime were uniquely gathered, all there in that one uplifted hand... It was an old song invested with new meaning. Something special was happening today; it seemed epitomized in this moment. I stood and looked, tracking my gaze from one side of the auditorium to the other as if to fix each individual with my eyes. I wanted to make contact with them all, and draw them in. Think about this thing today. Think about this thing we were doing for it may never happen in this way again... We were all part of some greater purpose, all attempting an understanding of one another and all part of something completely outside ourselves... I knew that nothing in my life had been worth anything until now. Yet, I felt no sadness that this moment could not be prolonged to last a lifetime. It was enough; this clear moment of absolute certainty. (Geldof, 1986: 8–10)

Geldof does it again on July 2nd, 2005. Mid-afternoon, at the Live 8 concert in Hyde Park, London. Twenty years older, twenty years more bedraggled, dishevelled and baggy eyed, but just as impassioned and encased in another moment of absolute certainty, he sings *I don't like Mondays*. Again, as the words _And the lesson today is how to die_ leave his lips, he simply stops singing, stands still and looks at the crowd. Then, as before, the words touch them where they live – inside their bodies. The words penetrate their hearts, circulate in their blood, connecting them to the millions of people starving around the world, many of whom, in that silent interval in a rock song, actually _do_ die. Jim feels the heart pounding inside his chest, feels his stomach churning, as the tears stream down his cheeks tasting just the same as they did in 1985. Amid the flux of emotions that drench his being, Jim recognizes one that surprises him. It is envy.

Jim envies Geldof’s glorious moments of certainty. Envies his courage. Envies his ability to make a difference in a world increasingly characterized by gross indifference. In his teens and student days, Jim had been seduced for a while by the illusion of certainty that is the privilege of the young. When he became a secondary school teacher, he really did believe he could, and would,
make a difference. But disillusionment quickly crept in as government initiatives took their toll on a rapidly demoralized profession. His escape into the ivory tower of the University of Wannabee Academic (UWA) had put fire in his belly for a while as, armed with an embryonic understanding of critical theory, he played the role of a radical academic. It all sounded so good, so exciting, so certain. Of course, it wasn’t, the only certainty being that not much really changed. The rules of the game remained the same, only gradually the policing of scholarship became more open, more evident, more in-your-face. The mantra: ‘Research grants in – Publications out’ began to colonize the terrain. More waves of disillusionment engulfed him. At times he almost drowned.

But Jim could swim. He swam with the tide long enough, and well enough, to get promotions and become a full professor. He bobbed along on the top of waves when things got stormy. He dived to escape the crashing tumult, holding his breath in an eerie silence. When the weather was good, he sometimes, as Director of Research for the School of Performance Studies (SPS), turned against the current, trying to create a safe harbour where colleagues and students could float without caution, thinking and feeling differently about themselves and their research. Yet, too often, his arms and legs tired of thrashing furiously as the forces below the surface held him in place, teaching him the futility of his actions before turning him in the direction they chose. Right now he was treading water – just! But the undertow was slowly pulling him down.

Jim’s mind flicked to a brief encounter he had had the day before with Alan Jarvis, a young member of his School. When Jim asked him how his research was going and how he felt about the way the feedback on his publication output was handled a few weeks earlier, where the words ‘vulnerable’ and ‘at risk’, not of his own choosing, were uncomfortably projected from Jim’s mouth by forces beyond his control, Alan replied.

‘You made me feel like shit. You really did. You made me feel like my research didn’t count. That I didn’t count. You made me feel like shit. I didn’t expect that from you.’

Stunned, Jim felt his stomach churn. He could feel the hurt in Alan’s wounded voice. He could taste the venom in the words.

‘I didn’t realize,’ was the feeble response Jim offered. ‘I didn’t realize. I really didn’t realize.’

Jim struggled on.

‘I thought I was being helpful. I thought I was being supportive of your research.’

As these words stumbled out, he saw Alan’s eyes glaze over in disbelief. It was a ‘Fuck you’ look.

‘If I came over as anything other than supportive, then, I’m sorry. I really am very sorry. Clearly, I got it wrong.’

As he heard himself say this, Jim realized that lately he felt sorry about a lot of things that seemed to be going wrong. He thought of the events that preceded his meeting with Alan, making him ‘feel like shit’. Making Jim feel like shit. One stood out vividly.
Selfing the CV

As a cyclist, Jim hated January. Cold, grey, but worst of all, wet. Today, it pours down and despite waterproofs he arrives at work damp and clammy. Closing the curtains in his office, he opens the filing cabinet and pulls out a towel and a clean shirt. No time to shower. He has to check the documentation before the meeting – that is, check he has the curriculum vitae of every member of staff in the SPS. Each vitae, each research profile, each person, would be scrutinized in minute detail today. As Director of Research, he would also be prodded and probed, dissected and examined in detail. His unease grows by the minute. Perhaps that is why his skin remains moist, making his shirt stick to his back. Then his stomach rumbles loudly. Once again, he forgot to eat any breakfast.

The phone rings.

‘Morning Jim. Just reminding you of the Research Output Meeting at 10.’

‘Thanks Sally.’ Jim says laughingly, ‘But this is one I don’t think I need reminding about.’

And he means it. He really does not need reminding about this meeting. He has been preparing for it for the last two months, speaking at length with each member of staff in the School about their publications, the kinds of journals they were in or hoped to get into, their grant applications, how much money they had brought in and their research strategy for the next academic year. In Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) terms, he had to get a sense of their strengths and weaknesses. At the meeting he now walked towards, these strengths and weaknesses would become his to celebrate or defend against.

Glancing at the oil paintings of past Vice Chancellors (VCs) on either side of him in the corridor, an all-male parade, he begins to feel judged as their eyes silently follow his progress. As he approaches the office of the current VC, fear touches him. All his working-class insecurities and anxieties explode: ‘The fear of being found out.’ Adrenaline kicks in. Fight or flight? He wants to run but cannot. Caught in the headlights like a doomed rabbit, his pupils dilate. He freezes. Then, in slow motion he knocks on the door.

Sally Marsh, the VC’s secretary, opens the door with her usual radiant smile.

‘Jim, right on time as usual. Lovely to see you. Go on through, they’re all in there. Can I get you a coffee?’

‘That would be great. Black no sugar. And make it strong, I’m going to need it.’

She laughs. He doesn’t.

As he enters the inner sanctum, the faces around the table look up. The VC nods and smiles a welcome.

‘Hello Jim. Thanks for coming. Get comfortable and we’ll make a start.’

Jim found it funny to be thanked for attending a meeting when it was clear that he had no choice but to be there. As he sat down, he felt far from comfortable. Across from him sat the VC. To his right was the Deputy VC, Professor Morris from Behavioural Sciences who had SPS as one of the six schools he
line-managed. To the left was Professor Simpson, Head of Chemistry, whose job it was to act as an independent advisor and mentor to SPS in relation to its preparation for, and submission to, the RAE. Seated slightly back from the table was Julie Adams from Personnel who was to give advice on the contractual situations of staff as required, should they not be ‘performing at the expected standard’ and ‘constitute a risk of not being submitted’ to the RAE. This was serious business.

All stared studiously at the list of publications produced by Jim for each member of staff in SPS since the last RAE in 2001. On a separate sheet were the publications (maximum four) that would be submitted by each of them as exemplars of their work, and a scale from 1–4 for rating them. In unison, the faces lifted as the VC spoke.

‘If I can just clarify. This meeting only deals with research output in the form of publications. We’ll deal with grant profiles at another time. The task today is to go through each member of staff in SPS to check not just the quantity of their output, but most importantly its quality in terms of the RAE guidelines. I take it that you have all had the opportunity to acquaint yourself with these.’

Everyone around the table nods in confirmation. Jim feels the urge to point out that since these had dominated his life for the last year it would be difficult not to be acquainted with them. In a wicked corner of his mind, he imagines Geldof’s voice coming out of his mouth saying in his soft Irish accent:

‘Vice Chancellor, can I just point out that this RAE stuff is a crock of shit. An absolute load of bollocks. I know it, you know it, we all know it. So why don’t we just admit it and get on with something worthwhile?’

To stop himself smiling, Jim concentrates hard on the sheet before him that gives the definitions of quality levels. He can almost recite them by heart:

Four star: Quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour.

Three star: Quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour but which nonetheless falls short of the highest standards of excellence.

Two star: Quality that is recognized internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.

One star: Quality that is recognized nationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.

Unclassified: Quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognized work. Or work which does not meet the published definition of research for the purposes of this assessment.

The VC then invites Jim to go through the list of staff and discuss each in turn. He does so, answering questions from the panel about each as he goes along. How good is the journal? What is its impact factor? Does it really warrant the star it has been awarded? Where there is joint authorship, is the staff member a ‘leader’ or a ‘follower’? Can they upgrade and publish in ‘better’ journals before the submission date for the RAE?
Jim has prepared his case for each person on the list. However, he notes the look of dismay on the faces of Professors Morris and Simpson when he explains to the panel that in the social sciences the impact factor of journals is very low compared to the physical sciences. He knows that in their schools the impact factor is one of the core criteria for judging the ‘quality’ of papers. As such, he feels very vulnerable when his own four publications are discussed and it is noted that two of the journals have no impact factor at all! This sense of vulnerability annoys Jim. He knows that the impact factor approach is a flawed, misleading and rigged game. So do others.

But here, in this arena, he feels obliged to play a game in which the curriculum vitae as a central feature of academic life and an autobiographical practice becomes a call to account for the self that one is. When the panel members read the CV and the publications as performance outcomes, they are reading the self-story of the person. As part of this routine, they are encouraged to read the gaps and listen to the silences in the CV in terms of what it tells them about the person – about the self. This self is then judged accordingly and consequences follow. The CV as an autobiographical practice and presentation of self is a risky business on days like this. The risk crystallizes in front of Jim in the words of the VC.

‘Thanks for that Jim and for answering our questions about your staff. It’s good to see that the majority are working in the 2 to 3 star category, and that there is a good sprinkling of 4 star publications in there as well. It’s also encouraging to note that almost everyone in the School has got four papers eligible for submission in the RAE. But, there are three that, as the figures show, are a cause for concern. My suggestion is that we go back now and discuss each of these in detail. Let’s begin with Alan Jarvis who at the moment only has two papers published. One a 2 star, the other a 3 star. Tell us about him.’

Jim knew this was coming; like them, he had read the gaps and listened to the silences in Alan’s CV. He knew their interpretation was ‘problem – weak scholar’. But, unlike the other members of the panel, he knew Alan and his situation. He wanted to give a different presentation of self for Alan.

‘Well, as you know, having gained his PhD, Alan joined us just before the last RAE as part of our sociology group. He very quickly got out four good publications and he was submitted in our return in 2001. In this sense, he did a great job but, unfortunately for him, he used up all his credit from his PhD in the process. This meant he then had to start to generate new projects to get the data for more publications. But he’s well focused on the task. We’ve given him a PhD student and he’s done a good job with her. I’m confident that, despite Alan having to take on a big administrative role in the School – which he has done very successfully – that he will have at least two more good publications in print before the RAE submission.’

‘That’s encouraging to hear,’ intervened Professor Thompson.

‘However, I must say that despite what you have told us, I find two papers produced in over 3 years to be a weak profile. I’d expect a junior member of my
staff to produce much more than that. When you give him feedback on his profile, you will certainly have to include the words ‘vulnerable’ and ‘at risk’. And, given this weak profile, I have to ask whether or not you can guarantee Dr Jarvis will have two more publications by the RAE submission date?’

Jim steadied himself and said slowly but surely.

‘Yes, I can guarantee it.’

The VC looked him directly in the eyes as he repeated what Jim had heard him say in other meetings.

‘I hope you can Jim, as any member of your School who is not submitted to the RAE will either have their contract terminated or be put on a teaching-only contract.’

Jim stared back and stated flatly.

‘Thank you for reminding me of that fact Vice Chancellor.’

After the three-hour meeting, Jim was drained, empty. As he walked back to his office, he went through a range of emotions – anger, disappointment, fear, helplessness, confusion, shame, insecurity, anxiety, determination, hostility. There was also a little bit of pride for a job ‘well done’, in that he had managed to get most of his staff successfully through the process for another year. But then he felt complicit, tainted by management speak and their business world ideology. He had played the game on their terms, not his. Had played a game that he did not believe in. Had played a game that made him despair, and feel sick inside. Bob Geldof would never have done that, Jim thought. He wouldn’t have acquiesced and rolled over. He would have done something to challenge them. At that moment, Jim hated himself with a ferocious intensity.

The last email he sent out that day was to all the staff asking them to fix a time so that he could give them individual feedback on their publications from the Research Output Meeting. He ended the email with the following statement:

‘Please note, despite what many might have you believe, you are not your CV. You are so much more than your CV.’

Jim hit the send button. Then, absentmindedly, he took out his favourite fountain pen, found a clean sheet of paper and began to write, ‘I am not my CV. I am so much more than my CV.’ Having filled both sides of the A4 paper, he filled another one, and then another one, and kept on going. The same words each time, ‘I am not my CV. I am so much more than my CV.’ The phone call from Laura stopped him.

‘It’s late Jim. You sound worn out. Why don’t you just come home and forget it all.’

Jim agreed. But knew that he could not forget it all. As Laura waited for him, she felt more and more worried about the signs of deterioration she had noticed recently in Jim’s physical and mental health. She decided that once again she would try and get him to talk about and at least acknowledge these signs, when they next got a quiet moment together. But quiet moments were difficult to come by in their hectic lives.
‘Hi Big Fellah! Come on in. Grab a seat,’ Jim laughingly says as he welcomes Paul Mason into his office.

At 6 feet 4 inches and 17 stone of mainly muscle, Paul towers over Jim. Their shared interest in martial arts had led to numerous discussions over coffee in the cafeteria. It was there that he learned of the fear and panic that pervaded the School of Educational Studies as it shed staff, and the dire circumstances that Paul now found himself in as a member of that School.

On entering the office, Paul collapses into a chair. To Jim he looks smaller than when he last saw him two weeks ago weight-training in the university gym. Now his body wilts, it sags, as if the sap has been drained out of him. His skin is pale, the cheeks of his face hollow and pinched. The eyes are tired and red. They do not look at Jim but down at the table.

‘So what brings you to this neck of the woods. Haven’t you got any work to do?’ Jim jokes to hide his unease at Paul’s physical appearance. Paul’s eyes remain fixed on the table in front of him. When he speaks, the usual vibrancy of his voice is absent. The words come out in a quiet whisper.

“They’ve told me I’m going to lose my job. They’re going to sack me.’

Jim watches his friend’s shoulders sink inside his jacket. Almost inaudibly, Paul sighs.

‘I don’t know what to do. I just don’t know.’

The ‘they’ Paul spoke of was the Joint Staffing and Research Committee. Over the previous four months, they had done an assessment of all the staff in the School of Educational Studies and placed each into one of three categories with regard to their research profile and the financial viability of the courses they taught on. Safest of all was Category 1: Low Risk. Category 2 was Medium Risk. Category 3 was High Risk, the risk being the risk of having one’s contract terminated. Those in Category 3 had been advised of the situation and meetings had been held with senior management to discuss voluntary severance arrangements. If they didn’t take this option, they had been warned that their contracts would be terminated anyway.

‘But the last time we spoke you were in the Medium Risk Category,’ Jim blurted. ‘What’s changed it all?’

As he waited for a response, Jim’s mind reviewed the meeting they had had prior to Paul’s facing the Committee for the first time. He had helped Paul prepare his case. To remind the Committee that he had sole responsibility for 50 students in his subject, and to emphasize that, despite having no other staff support, this subject area had scored ‘outstanding’ in all areas in the recent Ofsted Inspection7 and had been given the highest overall classification in their provider quality system. Tell them about the excellent student evaluations you get year after year for your teaching. And stress that, despite all the time this role entailed, you have managed to publish three articles in refereed journals.

Paul slowly answers Jim’s question.
‘They say my history here doesn’t count for anything. They now say my research is not good enough. Not the right quality. Just not good enough.’

His voice thins and trails off.

He gasps, ‘I’m not good enough.’

Jim sees the tears glisten in Paul’s eyes and feels his own begin to swell, clouding his vision as he watches his friend’s muscular frame crumple in front of him. As the tears begin their slow descent to his cheeks, Jim stands and moves quietly over to Paul.

‘Do me a favour Big Fellah. Stand up and let me give you a hug.’

Paul rises cautiously from his chair, as if the movement itself is painful. It is painful. This is a body in pain, wracked with pain, immobilized by pain, broken through pain.

Jim wraps his arm around Paul. As he gently hugs him, he feels the warmth of his broad muscular shoulders. He whispers.

‘You are good enough. You are a good man. Don’t let them tell you otherwise. Don’t believe the shit they are giving you.’

Squeezing a little harder, he says it again.

‘You are good enough. You are a good man.’

Holding Paul tightly, he says, ‘You are not your CV. You are so much more than your CV.’

As Jim stands back, for the first time since he entered the office Paul raises his head to look directly at him. Reciprocal tears glint on Paul’s cheeks. Wiping them away with the back of his massive hand, he smiles.

‘Thanks Jim.’

‘It’s nothing Big Fellah. Fuck them. The most important thing now is you and your family. Let’s talk about your future. Let’s talk strategies.’

As they sit down, Jim rings his secretary and tells her, ‘Can you keep everybody away from me for the next hour. If they ask, just tell them I’m in a research meeting.’

As he puts the phone down, they both burst out laughing.

**Corridor conversations**

Still deep in thought about Paul, Jim made his way down the corridor toward the photocopying machine. Suddenly, out of an office halfway down came a colleague known by staff and students alike as the ‘Weasel’. Normally, Jim avoided him whenever possible. But, with nowhere to hide, he went for minimal interaction.

‘Hi Steve,’ he said before moving on down the corridor at rather too fast a pace.

But he could not get far enough away in the time available. It came as it always did, a thin voice from behind him.

‘Oh Jim, just to let you know that paper I told you about has been accepted for publication. It’s got an impact factor of 5.4 so it’s really up there. It will look great in my RAE return.’
Inside, Jim squirmed at the Weasel’s mantra. In his world, everything was about impact factors. For him, a high impact factor journal meant it must be good the irony being that, if the a-theoretical, single research design, evaluation orientated studies that the Weasel specialized in made it into such journals then, for Jim, by definition, it was mundane, predictable, tedious and self-indulgent fodder.

‘Congratulations,’ said Jim with a slight turn of the head, ‘That’s great news. Well done.’

What else could he say as Director of Research? He had to say it but he didn’t have to mean it. But just saying it got to him as he recalled how the Weasel was always putting down younger staff by inferring that the lower impact journals they published in were inferior and not worthy of attention. In fact, that they as colleagues were inferior and not worthy of attention by him. This was one reason why Jim detested the Weasel – he was an academic bully. This is why Jim spent so much time with younger staff explaining the mythology of impact factors and supporting their efforts to get published in journals that were relevant and appropriate for their work, and that developed their thinking, regardless of any impact factors. But the prevailing cultural climate at UWA swamped his words and generated a fear in those colleagues who had yet to gain tenure. Even those who had secure positions were not immune to this tyranny. These numbers actually counted in defining academic worth, in defining the value of the person.

Jim made for the end of the corridor. But still got shot by one more comment from the Weasel.

‘Before you disappear Jim, just one more thing. Very quickly, I promise.’

Jim felt obliged to stop. He turned to watch the Weasel close the distance between them.

‘It’s about the National Federation Grant proposal I put in. It’s got through to the second round, which means it has a really great chance of being successful. That should bring in another £140,000 to go with the £65,000 I brought in last year.’

Jim knew instinctively what was coming next. He almost said it for the Weasel but fought the impulse.

“That will give my RAE return a massive boost.’

The Weasel must have seen the contempt in Jim’s eyes as he quickly added: ‘And, of course, it will look really good for the School’s RAE return.’

Involuntarily, Jim’s vocal chords made the appropriate patterns to produce the enthusiastic words.

‘Great news again Steve. Keep going! We need to get our hit rate up on grants so everything helps.’

The Weasel gave a smug smile before going on his way. Watching him as he walked along the corridor, Jim reflected on the other reasons why he didn’t like the Weasel. He went through his mental checklist. The Weasel was only interested in himself and getting promotion as fast as he could. He had no interest
in teaching. This was obvious to the undergraduate and postgraduate students who had given him the lowest teaching evaluations of all the staff in the School since his appointment. He had no interest in supervising postgraduate students other than using them as extra hands to collect data for him and swell his output of publications. They, too, recognized this. Finally, the Weasel had no interest in his colleagues within the School. They were either obstacles to his progress or simply stepping stones along the way to higher things. Of this, they were acutely aware. Contra to Jim, the Weasel did believe that you are your CV and nothing more.

Catching himself in mid-thought, Jim stopped the flow of venom spewing from his mind. He compared his meeting with Paul a few minutes earlier with the passing encounter with the Weasel. One was a victim and one was a winner in this audit culture. But could he really blame the Weasel for what he did and how he operated? After all, that was what the powers that be in UWA actually wanted in the new era of market brands and public image. He was the new breed of academic, the organizational ‘man’, the master of self-promotion. His was the academic currency of the day where the slogan ‘papers out and grants in’ shaped the collective and individual consciousness. The audit culture at UWA framed by the strictures of the RAE sustained, confirmed and valorized the Weasel. He spoke the language, made the right moves, delivered the right products and did what was required of him by those with the power to advance his career trajectory. The ultimate docile body. But it worked. He had already gained one promotion since arriving and was being earmarked for another promotion in the immediate future. Jim could only watch in dismay and despair at this meteoric rise of mediocrity.

Finally, contact was made with the photocopier. Most staff loathed the tedium of photocopying but Jim found it strangely therapeutic. It constituted a minor ‘time out’ in his hectic day. The whirring of the machine and the rhythmic flashing of the lights and dials soothed him. With satisfaction, his sense of mastery had recently increased when, to the relief of his secretary, he had learned how to operate the stapling button on the copier. A small but cherished victory. Slowly, he began to lose himself in the dynamics of the machine as it went about its precise business.

Jim’s reverie was interrupted by Louise, one of his favourite PhD students. He hadn’t even noticed her approaching.

‘So this is where you hide away Jim,’ she said without smiling.

He read the body language. The signs were not good.

‘I’ve been trying to get hold of you for the last two days. I’m really stuck with this analysis and need your help. It’s driving me crazy.’

‘Yes, I know. Sorry Louise. But I’ve been stuck in meetings and bogged down with loads of admin. I was waiting to get a clear space before I answered your emails and fixed up a meeting.’

Louise was not impressed by the excuse. She hesitated before proceeding because she liked and respected Jim. When he did give time to her, he was inspiring. But today her angst was in full drive and she just had to speak her mind.
‘Look Jim, I know you are busy. I know how stressed you are. You’re always busy and stressed. And you are my supervisor and I have got to get my PhD on time. That’s not going to happen if I can’t get to you when I need to. And I need to right now. Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today! I shouldn’t have to feel guilty about asking for your time should I?’

Jim simply nodded in agreement. She was right on all counts. Bright, intelligent, dynamic and passionate about her research, she also worked four nights a week and some weekends in a restaurant to help fund her studies. Louise had every right to expect Jim to be readily available as her supervisor and guide her along the way. She should not have to feel guilty about asking for his time. But guilt was the feeling that washed over Jim as the photocopier continued to churn out the multiple copies of student notes for his lecture in 10 minutes’ time. He felt guilty about the lack of concentrated time he could give any of his PhD students. He felt guilty about hastily skim reading their drafts of chapters and embryonic analyses. He felt guilty that he could not keep up with the reading he needed to do to push their ideas forward and support their thinking. He felt guilty because he was selling them short. He hated this feeling being associated with an aspect of the job he loved. But, even in this domain, the manic pressures of saturated time, the sheer busy-ness at UWA thwarted his desire to be the kind of supervisor he wanted to be and the kind of supervisor his doctoral students had the right to expect him to be.

Standing there, Jim felt slightly disorientated. His emotions had swung from intense hostility to intense guilt in the space of a few moments. And now raw anger was seeping into the corporeal mix. Anger with a system that made him feel these emotions so often in his daily life. Each in their own way drained him, diminished him, eroded him, dehumanized him.

He looked at Louise. In the moment before he responded to her, the image of Geldof flicked onto the wall behind her. Jim could see it over her shoulder. It’s from a TV documentary about his life called ‘Saint or Singer’. In this part, Geldof is talking about the time when, following their success in the UK, the Boomtown Rats tried to break into the US market. He recalls that he was prepared to ‘Work, work, work. But beyond that my personal attitude wasn’t ready for it at all. “Don’t you tell me it’s important. I don’t care.”’ The people ‘telling him’ were the agents and the public relations people who stressed that to make it in the USA at that time you had to impress specific people in the music industry who would then guarantee your records being played on the radio.

Geldof goes on to describe an incident at a rock and roll convention where it was made clear beforehand that their future success or failure depended on their performance as judged by 16 men who controlled the radio play-list. Or, as Geldof put it, ‘My life depended on these gits in satin jackets.’ As he sang his song, he couldn’t get this image out of his head. Halfway through, Geldof stops singing and requests that the lights be turned up. Addressing the crowd, he asks them what they think of the music provided by the radio stations in the USA. After a returning chorus of ‘It sucks’ and stronger phrases, he then
points to the back of the venue and says, ‘Turn around. See those cunts in the satin jackets. These are the fuckers that control every day what you hear. Tell them what you just told me.’ As the crowd of youngsters turn to cheer and hurl insults, the 16 men rapidly take their leave. The same day, the Boomtown Rats were struck off the play-list of 68 radio stations. As Geldof states with a wry smile, ‘I blew it.’

As he looks at Louise, Jim wants to say, ‘Turn around.’ He wants to expose the contemporary equivalent of the men in satin jackets who shape both their lives in a myriad of ways. But, of course, he doesn’t. The photocopier completes its task and falls silent. Jim takes his cue from the machine.

‘OK, I’m teaching for the next three hours. How about we meet in my office at 5.30. We can make a start then and fix up a time for another meeting.’

‘Great,’ said Louise with her first smile of their conversation. ‘See you there’.

Jim also smiled but said nothing. He grabs the copies of the lecture notes for the 150 students that are waiting for his 2pm lecture. He would just about make it on time. Running across the campus, he realizes that today these students are due to hand in the first of their two 3000 words essays that his course requires. That means 450,000 words to be read and commented on, plus 150 evaluation sheets to be filled in, all within the four-week deadline set out by the UWA regulations for assessment procedures. He also knows that, when he meets Louise after this lecture, he will have to tell her that his diary is already full for this week and that he cannot give her any time until next week. Her reaction would be predictable, but none the less justified.

Suddenly, his legs feel heavy. His breath feels heavy. He feels heavy. His body feels weighed down by forces that are invisible to those around him. Jim stops running and slowly walks to the lecture theatre. He is seven minutes late. The students don’t seem to notice or care.

Question time

In the café, Jim picks up the Books Section of The Times newspaper. He glances over an article by the journalist Jeanette Winterson titled, ‘Let’s stop publishing books that don’t really need to be books’. It makes him laugh and he pulls out his notebook to write down some of what she says:

The push from government for academics to go on producing pointless research year in year out, whether or not they have anything to say, has led to the present university library explosion. There is simply nowhere to put this stuff. Government is suspicious of creative endeavour and productive daydreaming, so it tries to turn academics into civil servants. Shove pieces of paper around and you are doing your job – get on with your teaching and think long and deep until you have something to say – and you are clearly a waste of taxpayers’ money. (The Times)

He laughs inside again, then turns to a young man on the next table and says to him:
'Guess who I’m not?'
Somewhat taken aback, the young man looks up from his coffee.
‘I’m sorry I didn’t catch what you said.’
‘Guess who I’m not?’ Jim repeated.
‘Guess who you’re not?’
‘Yes. Guess who I’m not?’
‘I don’t really get what you’re after,’ says the bemused young man.
‘It’s simple,’ says Jim getting a little exasperated. ‘Just guess who I’m not.’
‘I don’t know,’ came the defensive reply with a touch of worry in the voice.
‘I’m not Bob Geldof that’s who I’m not,’ blurts Jim.
‘I’m not Bob Geldof that’s for sure.’
‘Right.’ says the young man as he thinks about how to exit this situation.
‘Right. So you’re not Bob Geldof.’
‘And I’ll tell you something else,’ says Jim, ‘I’m not my CV either.’
He laughs loudly at his own pronouncement and the confused look on the young man’s face.
In the high street, Jim begins to approach shoppers and passers-by to ask them the same question.
‘Guess who I’m not?’
Regardless of their response, he quickly answers his own question for them.
‘I’m not Bob Geldof that’s who I’m not. And I’m not my CV either.’
Catching sight of himself in a shop window, Jim turns to ask his reflection the same question.
‘Guess who I’m not?’
And his reflection responds.
‘I’m not Bob Geldof that’s who I’m not. And I’m not my CV either.’

Case notes
This is a tough consultation. The man sitting opposite him is hard to work out, hard to get inside of. Very articulate, very intelligent, very good at self-analysis and self-diagnosis, and even better at deflecting any questions that might penetrate the cognitive armour that he is using to protect his obviously fragile core. Dr Marriot, consultant psychiatrist, feels uneasy with cases like this. Is the man he looks at now playing games with him? Who is doing the analysing here? But, there is one thing he needs to know, so he asks.
‘Have you ever felt about ending it all and committing suicide?’
The words hung in the air as Jim took his time to answer.
‘No. I don’t have the courage for that. Plus I think it’s a selfish act. I would never do that to Laura and the kids.’
Then with a big smile he added, ‘That said, there are some people I could name that I would like to “end.”’
The answer like so many others he gave was laced with a dry humour. Dr Marriot smiled back.
‘Yes, I guess we could all do that. But my sense is that your list would be longer than mine.’

Now it was Jim’s turn to return the smile as the consultation came to an end. As Jim left and the door closed, Dr Marriot frowned. In the last five years, what had begun as a trickle of university teachers referred to him by their general practitioners was fast becoming a torrent. They were clearly a very highly stressed occupational group. Looking down, he browsed his case notes for the session. Dr Marriot liked Jim, despite him being hard work to make sense of. Liked his ability to see his own weaknesses, strengths and proclivities. Liked the way he used his academic knowledge to challenge him at times. Demolishing, for example, his suggestion about Jim possibly being in the middle of a ‘mid-life crisis’ as an:

‘Ideologically informed social construction that served the interests of the medical profession.’

But again there was the humour, as Jim finished this off by saying:

‘If it is a mid-life crisis then I’ve had it since I was 18 years old! Which kind of makes it a long incubation period doesn’t it?’

Yes, likeable, but very, very, troubled and close to the edge of a total breakdown. Like many of the male university teachers he had seen recently, Jim was ‘living’ from the neck up, inside his brain, and not connecting to the rest of his body, which was screaming out to him for attention. Reaching for his pen, he writes a letter to Jim’s local doctor:

Dear Dr Samuels,

Reference: Dr Jim Anderson

Contact type: Outpatient

Date seen: November 8th, 2005

Jim is a Professor and Director of Research in a School at the University of Wannabe Academic. He is 50 years of age. Since April 2005 he has been feeling low in mood, irritable, and more anxious than usual. He feels as if he is running on empty, feeling a sense of desolation and fear. He is experiencing free floating anxiety and there are many occasions when he feels overwhelmed. He has not been feeling suicidal. Jim is currently clinically depressed and exhibits an alarming number of symptoms relating to burnout. As such, he is physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausted for a number of related reasons in which work pressures play a prominent role. His father has also suffered from depression. Jim has been taking Citalopram 20mg daily but would like to explore other ways of improving the way he feels.

Jim estimates that he works about 60 hours a week. He enjoys undertaking personal research and writing but the bulk of his job involves other activities, including, teaching, supervision, and a heavy administration load. The latter, according to him is extremely boring, tedious, and is ‘killing’ him. He works in the evenings and on Sundays. As a consequence, he gets little time to do the things he really enjoys and that sustain him. To keep fit, he goes to the gym three times per week and cycles. He is currently drinking a minimum of fifty-five units of alcohol per week.
Opinion and management

Jim is currently low in mood and experiencing very high levels of anxiety.

This can be helped with the antidepressant (currently Citalopram 20mg). Given his current state I suggest raising the dosage to 40mg per day. In the short term, I feel he would benefit from a course of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

In terms of trying to understand the cause of his depression and anxiety there would appear to be an innate component in that it seems to run in his family, and he has had a tendency to worry for much of his life. There are some additional factors which are probably causing the symptoms to become more prominent at this stage in his life.

(1) He is drinking too much alcohol. People who drink over 28 units for any length of time are at a greater risk of experiencing anxiety and depression. In order to feel better and stay better he should, at the very least, be halving his consumption.

(2) He is working too many hours. We know that people who work more than 40 hours per week for any length of time are also at increased risk of becoming low and depressed. He needs to find a way of reducing his workload.

(3) He is not getting as much fulfilment and enjoyment out of his work as he used to. His workplace conditions seem to operate as a ‘toxic environment’ for him. It sounds as if for much of the day he is bogged down with tasks that do not really inspire him, and this is particularly so with his administrative duties as a Director of Research. He is a very creative individual but it would appear that this creative drive is constantly frustrated in the workplace given the lack of time he has to devote to personal research. Ideally, and as a matter of urgency, he needs to tackle this issue with his Head of Department. Jim will not find it easy to make changes here. However, it is essential that he does so as he is already displaying various symptoms of burnout. If he does not confront these work related issues now there is a very distinct risk that he will run out of steam completely over the next few years (or very much earlier) resulting in full burnout and psychic collapse. Jim does not like being tough and does not deal with conflict situations very well. But, it seems to me as if some fairly hard decisions need to be made in the immediate future. Crucially, Jim needs to be thinking of himself and his health over and above the health of his department.

(4) There may be other things he can do to recharge his batteries. The CBT should enable him to modify how he approaches worries and challenges. As a devoted father, he commits a great deal of time to his children. However, as they are becoming older he could explore spending more time with his wife and even getting away together for the occasional weekend.

(5) CBT will assist Jim in the short term. There are, however, deep-rooted issues relating to extremely low self-esteem and a lack of acceptance and valuing of self that need to be explored by a longer-term therapy. I will make a decision about what form this therapy will take when Jim has completed the course of CBT.

Yours sincerely,
Dr S. Marriot, MB, BCh, FRCPsych
Selfing the CD collection

‘Just think, this time last year we had the Live 8 party.’
‘Don’t remind me. I’m still getting over the hangover!’
Laura and Jim laughed together as she poured more coffee.
‘It was a great laugh. Shall we have another one this year?’
‘Maybe we should. The only problem with the pills I’m on is that I can’t
drink much alcohol now and I’d hate to see all that good ale go to waste.’
‘So, I’ll have to drink your share as well then,’ smiled Laura before asking:
‘How are the pills working?’
‘I’m not sure. I think they’ve taken the edge off things a bit, don’t you?’
‘Well, you aren’t flying off the handle so much and you seem less irritable.
So that’s an improvement. But what about work, have you arranged to talk to
your boss?’
Jim hesitated.
‘Not yet,’ he said, knowing the response this would invite from Laura as her
blue eyes flashed at him.
‘Jim, I can’t believe you just said that. I thought we agreed that over a month
ago. That’s simply not fair.’
‘Things have been so hectic with this RAE shit. Everyone’s under pressure
and him more than most. I need to find the right time that’s all.’
‘Right, like when you crack up and end up in hospital,’ Laura snapped.
‘And then what? Do you think they will stick by you? Do you think your VC
and the rest of them will visit you every day and look after you? Do you think
they really care about you? Don’t kid yourself Jim, they don’t give a damn
about you, only about what you can do for them! It’s us, Rachael, Jacob and me,
who really care about you, that’s who.’
Jim simply nodded his assent.
‘I’m sorry sweetheart, that came out all wrong. I didn’t mean it to sound like
that. But, it’s just that you are always telling the youngsters in your depart-
ment not to kill themselves for the job because, after all, as you say, in the eyes
of the university they are “just an advert”. So why can’t you apply that to your-
self. In the end, if you die of a heart attack, you’re just an advert, just the same
as them. I don’t want to keep going on at you. It’s just that I worry about you.
And I want you to start worrying, start caring, about yourself.’
‘I know. I know,’ said Jim. ‘I promise I’ll do it by the end of the month.’
‘Promise?’
‘Yea promise. Boy scout’s honour!’
‘But we all know you were thrown out of the scouts because you couldn’t
deliver on the honour side,’ Laura giggled as she kissed Jim on the cheek. ‘So
just get on and do it!’

Jim was about to return the kiss when Rachael breezed into the room.
‘God, it’s the man with the sore throat again. Can I turn him off?’ she asked
making her way to the CD player.
‘Don’t you dare!’ Jim shot back.

‘Leave dear old Leonard Cohen alone.’

‘But Daddy, I can’t stand him! He’s so boring and depressing.’

‘He’s an acquired taste Rachael, believe me. He’s one of my favourites.’

‘I can tell. You’ve got all his CDs here. How sad is that! But you’ve got nothing by that Irish guy you like. Why not?’

‘Well, I was never into his music. Just some of the things he’s done and stood for. I’ve been into Cohen since I was 15 years old. I’ve always loved his words, his songs. Your mum and me have seen him three times in concert.’

‘Whatever. No lectures please,’ says Rachael before she exits to go visit friends.

Laura smiles.

‘You know Jim, except for the swearing, you are so much more like Leonard Cohen than Bob Geldof. You inhabit Cohen’s universe much more than Geldof’s. He’s sustained and comforted you over the years. You always turn to his music when you want to work things through. I guess you’re both Professors of Melancholy. And, anyway, I think Cohen’s much sexier than Geldof. In fact, he’s beautiful and getting better with age. So be careful, if you don’t sort yourself out, I might leave you for him.’

Jim leaned over to return the kiss that had hung in the air for the last few minutes.

‘I’m sorry Laura, really sorry. I know this has been a shit time for you. I wouldn’t blame you if you did leave me. To be honest, if I were you, I’d have left ages ago.’

‘Then be thankful that I’m not you,’ said Laura quietly.

‘I am thankful. Believe me, I am thankful.’

Each then lost themselves in Cohen’s 1992 song Anthem as it filled the spaces of the room previously occupied by their conversation.

Jim finds sanctuary in the lilting melody, the lyric poignancy and Cohen’s gravel voice. Each exquisite phrase crystallizes on his skin before soaking into his bones. The chorus floats in and out of him, cleansing his flesh. Its repetition at the end of the song becomes a sensual parting gesture and an invitation to return:

Ring the bells that still can ring  Forget your perfect offering  There is a crack, a crack in everything  That’s how the light gets in.

Ring the bells that still can ring  Forget your perfect offering  There is a crack, a crack in everything  That’s how the light gets in  That’s how the light gets in.

As the song fades and the tiny silence in between the tracks envelops him, Jim begins to think how differently he might story the RAE landscape and his territory within it through the songs of Cohen. He softly sings the chorus to himself and decides to accept its embrace: ‘There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.’
Moments of consideration

A story has been offered for your consideration. Now comes the problem of how to ‘close’ the paper. The temptation is to awaken the dormant methodological issues that abound in work of this kind. One possibility might be to use a ‘writing-story’ that shares with the reader how this particular text came to be constructed. For Laurel Richardson (1995), this means that, ‘Rather than hiding the struggle, concealing the very human labor that creates the text, writing-stories would reveal the emotional, social, physical, and political bases of the labor’ (p. 191). Certainly, I am not adverse to this tactic, and have used it before (see Sparkes, 1996). Alternatively, like many others, I have engaged in theoretical defences of, and rationales for, experimental forms of writing. As such, I could close by locating myself within this debate and then espouse the virtues of using stories as a form of research in the social sciences. Here, for example, I could once again call on the work of Ronald Pelias (2005) who makes a convincing case for the methodological power of performative writing:

Performativewriting expands notions of what constitutes disciplinary knowledge ... features lived experience, telling, iconic moments that call forth the complexities of human life ... rests on the belief that the world is not given but constructed, composed of multiple realities ... often evokes identification and empathetic responses. It creates a space where others might see themselves ... turns the personal into the political and the political into the personal. It starts with the recognition that individual bodies provide a potent database for understanding the political and that hegemonic systems write on individual bodies ... participates in relational and scholarly contexts. (pp. 417–20)

On this occasion, however, I want to resist the methodological impulse. Given that I have chosen to offer a story for consideration, then the story must do its work, on its own, as a story. To enhance this possibility, I prefer to operate as what Thomas Barone (2000) describes as an ‘artful writer-persuader’ who understands the necessity of relinquishing control over the interpretations placed on a story, inviting an aesthetic reading whereby readers interpret the text from their own unique vantage points, contributing their own questions-answers-experiences to the story as they read it, as co-participants in the creation of meaning. My hope is that the reader might think with the story and see where it takes them. For Arthur Frank (1995), thinking with stories involves allowing one’s own thoughts to adopt the story’s immanent logic, its temporality, and its tensions and contradictions. When we think with stories, he suggests, the first lesson ‘is not to move on once the story has been heard, but to continue to live in the story, becoming in it, reflecting on who one is becoming, and gradually modifying the story’ (p. 159). As part of this process, should the story I have offered resonate with readers, then I hope they will look after the story and, when it is needed, share it with others.

Against this backdrop, therefore, I would prefer to close with some selected moments of consideration that a number of readers have kindly given to my story.
I am usually not much of a fan of ‘auto-ethnography’ and ‘fictionalized ethnography’ but I must say that I resonated with this. More importantly, I find it an example of exactly where these approaches to research actually make something possible in terms of capturing more nuanced layers of experience.

If the author had collected data more systematically as opposed to ‘informal interviews’ and ‘selected personal experiences’, the piece would not have the punch and resonance that it does. Hence, this is a case where these methods actually foster the project in capturing and communicating elements of the social that are more or less ineffable.

To overturn and overflow the received idea of ‘acceptable’ scholarship in a largely social science arena, to escape the sort of ‘oppressive empiricism’ that is in rigid opposition to interpretation, to enact a ‘generative undoing’ of the standard ‘boring’ writing of the academy (in Richardson’s straightforward terms) is a worthy goal IF the enactment allows something to be seen that could not otherwise be seen. Somewhere Foucault calls this ‘increasing the circumference of the visible.’

This piece does that.

I want to thank the author for sharing such a powerful piece. The world he describes becomes incredibly vivid and tremendously sad – how have we let our institutions of higher education become what they are? How have we ever allowed arbitrary quantitative measures to determine value? Indeed, we are not our vitae, nor are we the numbers and measures they use to reduce us. Forgive my rant, but the essay did for me what I believe an excellent essay of this kind can do: It made me think about how legislative policies have genuine consequences for individual lives. It allowed me to see more fully the complexity, both conceptually and emotionally, of the problem. It reminded me how the literary can have power within the social sciences (the essay is masterfully crafted). It persuaded me that change is needed. Quite honestly, after finishing the paper, I simply sat in my chair, stunned, depressed and moved. It made me want to reach out. It made me want to take action. So, I thank the author again for sharing his beautiful piece. What a gift!

Thank you for the RAE paper. Theoretically, it showed so much. The dynamics of bodies trying to achieve agency against structures so powerful, so debilitating and so ethically bankrupt. How bodies occupy space differently, and the ways in which, as relational beings, our actions have consequences on others. How our identities are so wrapped up in being an academic/writer. The way hierarchies create ‘artificial others’, and the emotional ripples and tides this has on bodies. The end result of reading it was – I had to lock my door – I cried ...

... Maybe, if I’m being honest, perhaps I also cried for myself – which surprised
me. I wonder if I’m cut out for this game. How can I survive in it? Do I want to
do this? Do I want to be part of this? Am I really any good? And I hope it moves
people to some form of action. It has stirred ‘something’ in me. I don’t yet
know what, but for that stirring I can only say a heartfelt thanks.

FEMALE ACADEMIC (EARLY CAREER: UNEMPLOYED)
Thanks so much for asking me to read your paper. I was going to say I really
enjoyed it, but that’s not exactly the correct expression for capturing my
experience of it! I found it very powerful and moving, and could really feel
the tension building. I actually started to get a pain in my head at the
thought of the photocopier being a source of relaxation (but perhaps that’s
because the one in our department breaks down any time I try and double-
side, sort and staple – and I end up spending hours climbing around the
insides of it). The ‘breakdown’ was perfectly articulated, subtle enough to be
believable but also very frightening. I also loved the ending and I could hear
the tune in my head to ‘there is a crack, a crack in everything’ and it is a
powerful strategy to get the reader to hear music at the end of a paper, very
visceral and emotive. I was left with all kinds of thoughts and questions –
perhaps not along the lines you were thinking with the paper, but these were
issues that stood out to me.

The UWA appears to be a hyper-masculine environment: women are
sparse on the ground and primarily secretaries, a wife, and an over-worked
student. In a way that made the Big Fellah’s tears more powerful, but also
made me wonder what it would be like if there were feminist colleges?
Would they enable an environment that handled stress differently – partic-
ularly in the alternative kinds of support systems and practices that femi-
nists often engage with. I found the prescription of pills and Cognitive
Behavioural Therapy – as well as the search for hereditary patterns for Jim’s
mental health issues very disturbing, but also a subtle portrayal of the ways
in which another hyper-masculine discipline (medicine) treats social and
emotional issues.

I’m really curious about what you’re going to do with this paper! Do you
have a plan to publish it? Are you going to deliver it at your next RAE meeting?
Will you share it with colleagues in your own and other departments? I think
there is lots of potential to be very subversive with something like this and I
really hope that you can find a way for it to have an impact both as a support
for colleagues and as a poke in the eye to the system! Finally, I just wanted to
mention something that you probably know already, but that I thought of
when Jim is envious of Bob Geldof. Despite being Irish – which is usually asso-
ciated with being a disadvantaged minority – Geldof is actually from an
extremely middle-class area of County Dublin and attended a very exclusive
school. Obviously, social class has a huge impact on one’s ability to tell the
world to fuck off and not have to live with the consequences. So I think that’s
it on that paper. I really did find it a very vivid piece.
MALE ACADEMIC (RECENTLY RETIRED)
The voice in Andrew’s story of Jim is partly mine. He did not speak for me but rather to me. I have met every person in that story in one way or another. I could feel the emotions, the despair; indeed, I openly flooded my cheeks with tears as I read, reflected and wondered why academia must go down the impoverishment trail of accountability. Impoverished in the sense that fleeting aspirational outcomes will be (if they are not already) deified. Such a lofty place they may hold in nuclear physics and biotechnology where impact (if not clarity and ethics) abounds as normal practice. But what of mere mortals in professions such as teaching, nursing and in the arts. The landscape of our universities will be irrevocably full of individualism born of the need to survive and flourish in a world where CVs are the only currency worth trading in. Perhaps we are in that land already.

There are two worlds in universities as depicted so beautifully by Andrew where one exists to serve our masters and the schemes governments force on publicly (part) funded universities. It acts from Vice Chancellors to Deputy VCs and then to Profs and Heads. It drills down to every nook and cranny. It drones on and on about quality, quality, quality, evidence, evidence, evidence. The lived world where students, academics and courses combine to produce university life can acknowledge that master. But we do not exist for that and very few live for that.

Andrew is prepared to dissect the body before it becomes a corpse. A brave act talking to a living organism and not offering a remedy yet providing a story that seeks and gains consideration in the reader. There’s always some reason to not feel good enough about yourself and the brutal and bullying aspects of an audit culture are exposed.

At another level the story juxtaposes personal conflict with career and beliefs to depict how academia has been rendered, perhaps neutered. Geldof as an activist spans the divide from belief to personal action. I found this a powerful stage to reflect on my own involvement in Tertiary Union activities where, once I became a Head of School it was expected that my Union involvement would cease. I saw my role as one that acted on behalf of the students and staff in the School, not as a voice for the VC. Perhaps I was lucky to last four years in that role.

However, in this paper stripped of academic convention, of supporting references, paradigmatic allegiances and the like, he has provided a startling example of story telling. It speaks of the things that matter to those that care. What more impact could it have than that.

FEMALE ACADEMIC (MID-CAREER)
I was looking for an appropriate way to describe the experience of reading ‘alongside’ you and with you ... but that is difficult as I recognise it is not one single experience, it is a mixture of experiences, feelings and emotions – mirth, delight at the writing style and to some extent the irreverence in that style (cocking a
snook at academia and what, as you say, we are expected to say and do). It is also
deep commiseration and empathy at the situations you describe ... I felt on read-
ing the Geldof paper that I was not the only one going 'mad' from the manic ten-
dency to want to do it all, and do it all not only well but also immediately. I have
come to judge myself recently as on the borderline of obsessive-compulsive dis-
order. The rise in manic behaviour when I feel stressed, the panic levels this year
at feeling the need to improve my performance all the time to ‘hit the stars’ and
to be seen to be ‘Miss Superwoman’ with the daughter having to run to fit in,
drawing the short straw. This realization has made me pretty miserable at the
way academic life is drawing me to some sort of a manic climax and the effect
that is having on (name of daughter) being caught up in her mother’s dogged
drive! So reading what you wrote in the Bob G paper made me smile and cry in
equal measure.

FEMALE ACADEMIC (MID-CAREER)
I hadn’t come across the idea of a ‘methodology of the heart’ before. I think it’s
very romantic – in the sense of being reminiscent of classic early nineteenth-
century Romantic sensibility. I once knew a PhD student who said to me,
when I was trying to take a class on research methods, ‘everyone is a kind of
research method’. Your paper seems to embody this insight. I liked it very
much and had flashes of recognition, identification (and also dis-
identification – ‘old’ universities v ‘new’ ones: it’s not as bad here in my
university!), and a very strongly mobilised feeling of rage at the ‘baddies’.
I’ve been thinking a lot recently about the desirability of civil disobedience
(versus the ingrained compliance of most of us when subjected to a series of
measures which eat away at our everyday liberties and stifle creativity), and
I think it’s what your piece of writing here is – an act of civil disobedience.
Under tyranny – of whatever kind – and when political solutions (Geldof)
don’t hold, its always poetry and music (Cohen) that provide consolation
and insight. Neither are things you can fight ‘them’ with, they’re not solu-
tions: both are a place to go where you can find a restorative relation with
reality (which is always a relief!!). But maybe there are ways of fighting back:
I’d like to think of the article as a piece of Samizdat, circulated furtively
around campuses! I know it would resonate with a good few of my
colleagues, so when you’re willing I’ll pass it on.

MALE ACADEMIC (EARLY CAREER)
I picked up your paper and my evening changed completely ... Now, most of the
shit I read is like wading through treacle to be honest (I know what this is like
actually because I spilt a pot of this on my head as a kid!). The theory is bril-
liant but divorced from people and society or alternatively the data is good but
divorced from theory. I consider my own work to be a slightly caustic amalgam
of the two, endeavouring to remain human and critical but inevitably
coloured by my own sense of alienation within an audit culture. Nearly every
paper I have written has been ‘forced’ and is overly distracted by its own sense of needing to make a statement and construct a presence, rather than flowing freely in between the abstract and the mundane in a carefree manner that all great classic sociology so obviously does – what other reference do I have here than Goffman – behaviour in public places springs to mind as does stigma? Anyway, your piece captures both without materialising either – it just tells a story, a very well-crafted collection of vignettes to be more specific in my own interpretation. I think this is a very, very, fine impressionistic tale or ethnographic fiction – I have never been able to confidently distinguish the two, but it blew me away whatever it is. It moved me deeply on a number of levels and in places sent shudders down my spine and tears to my eyes as I connected with the professional and personal passions portrayed in the various moments depicted. I also laughed a lot, ironically at times through your observations of just how much humour is present, even in some of the darker moments of our existence – if only we could see them as such as they unfold (I can’t).

We are all in there, characters are clearly discernable yet nicely ‘muxed’ to use an IT technical term (sound and image combined – kind of works here). To be sure, the stitching of moments comes together to portray a set of emotional experiences that I would challenge any academic to not relate to in some substantial way ... The tyranny of the audit culture powerfully impresses itself on any reader with an ounce of humanity and integrity left in them. But in a way that’s the rub, the piece is for me an act of resistance straight out of the Geldof school that, as it reaches its denouement, mellows into an even more subtle critique inspired by the melancholic modesty of Cohen. I think the main story is quite superb – but disturbing. We all know that the audit culture cannot handle subjectivity and yet you say the unsaid and get right beneath the veneer. And this is what is disturbing, that most of us fail to articulate our concerns in the right social spaces or times (and these are less obvious or easy than they used to be for sure). But it is not just disturbing at a critical level, it is also disturbing at a personal level.

MALE ACADEMIC (RECENTLY RETIRED)

The daily, creeping, moral exhaustion that is the RAE was certainly my main reason for retiring. It wasn’t an objection to the production of publications, it was that the system actively encouraged the publication of rubbish, the pointless, or the absolutely obvious. It shouldn’t be forgotten that some academic toilers like (no, love) the RAE system – they can apply for research grants just for the sake of it and demonstrate a heartfelt, fetishistic desire to please the system’s devisers. They can produce long and detailed (i.e. repetitive and bogus) research applications to parade and display their ‘ethical concerns’ (the area of ‘inclusion’ being a great favourite here), and should their applications be successful they then receive the thrill of not only having ‘got it!’ but also of being ‘moral’ as well. When they turn to the work of their students (and colleagues), they more often than not judge it by the rationalised standards that are their own, standards that have become part of their mental constitution.
Go to a conference and note that the most insightful work comes from investigations that have never been near an RAE-able research grant application. Properly productive research lives are increasingly lived in the hard won gaps between the ‘research systems’. It has been observed that hypocrisy is the homage vice pays to virtue. Quite! Jim has had it hard and deserves not only sympathy but also support.

To each of these academics living their lives in an audit culture, I thank you for your responses. I thank you for your consideration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont for giving this paper a chance even though they are not enamoured with the genre. Thanks also to the two anonymous referees for their insightful comments on an earlier draft, and thanks to the following for their reflections on earlier drafts: Betty Bock, David Brown, Peter Clough, Anne-Marie Cummins, Murray Drummond, Michael Erben, Roger Eston, Deborah Gallagher, Kate Galvin, Phil Hodkinson, Kay Inckle, David Jackson, Kip Jones, Ronald Pelias, Cassie Phoenix, Frances Rapport, Victor Perez Samaniego, Brett Smith, Peter Swan, Les Todres and Liz Wood. Finally, my thanks to Leonard Cohen for his kind permission to use the words from his song *Anthem*.

NOTES

1. The notion of a ‘methodology of the heart’ is clearly indebted to, and embedded in, the work of feminist scholars from the 1970s onwards who, advocating that the personal is political and the political is personal, explored and problematized the multiple ways in which the lived, gendered body is central to both the process and the product of research (e.g. see Price and Shildrick, 1999; Stanley, 1990; Stanley and Wise, 1993).

2. Robert Frederick Zenon Geldof. Born 5 October 1951, County Dublin, Ireland. Geldof was the leader of the Boomtown Rats, an Irish ‘new wave’ band of the 1970s and 1980s. The group had a string of hits in the UK and broke through to international popularity with the 1979 single *I don't like Mondays*. In 1984 Geldof turned activist, organizing 40 British pop musicians to record the tune *Do they know it’s Christmas?* under the name Band Aid; the goal was to raise money for victims of starvation in Africa. The song was a tremendous hit and led to the twin charity concerts known as Live Aid, held in London and Philadelphia on 13 July 1985. Geldof was given an honorary knighthood in 1986 and nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. In 2005 he helped organize another day of mega-concerts, called Live 8, urging leaders of the G8 nations to forgive African debt and increase aid to the continent. Live 8, with concerts in 10 cities around the world, was held on 2 July 2005. The G8 summit is where the leaders of the world’s most industrialized countries meet. These are UK, Russia, Germany, Japan, Italy, Canada, France and the USA. This summit was held at Gleneagles in Perthshire, Scotland.

4. A benign explanation of what the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2008 is about is as follows:

RAE 2008 is the sixth in a series of exercises conducted nationally to assess the quality of UK research and to inform the selective distribution of public funds for research by the four UK higher education funding bodies. RAE 2008 will provide quality profiles for research across all disciplines. Submissions from institutions will be assessed by experts in some 70 units of assessment. The main body of the assessment will take place in 2007–08, with outcomes to be published by the funding bodies in December 2008 (see http://www.rae.ac.uk/).

A less benign view is held by the Association of University Teachers who have a policy of opposition to the RAE. According to them:

The RAE has had a disastrous impact on the UK higher education system, leading to the closure of departments with strong research profiles and healthy student recruitment. The RAE has been responsible for job losses, discriminatory practices, widespread demoralisation of staff, the narrowing of research opportunities through the over-concentration of funding and the undermining of the relationship between teaching and research, with a consequent reduction in the quality of higher education available to students... Despite assurances to the contrary, the changes to the RAE methodology for the 2008 exercise have done nothing to rectify the faults of previous exercises, demonstrating the correctness of the association’s view that the system itself is fundamentally flawed and unreformable... The current exercise is stimulating even more 'games-playing', victimisation of individual members of staff, competitive recruitment, departmental closures and 'restructuring' driven purely by attempts, ill-fated or otherwise, to maximise RAE income. The exercise will further distort and disrupt the system and devalue the professional contribution of many staff to teaching and research ... The AUT does not believe that the tokenistic references to equal opportunities in the RAE documentation will do anything to protect staff from arbitrary exclusion from the exercise and from threats to their conditions of service and security of employment (see: http://www.aut.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=130).

5. The rhetoric of ‘quality assurance’ pervades university life in the UK. The psych chic aim behind Quality Assurance (QA) programmes appears to be the production of comfort and reassurance. However, as Anne-Marie Cummins (2002) points out, the desire to know (in order to evaluate), which is central to the methodology of quality assurance, masks a deeper desire not to know things that are uncomfortable, unsettling and most definitely not reassuring. Her analysis rejects the ‘programmatic’ and ‘colonizing’ ambitions of the QA rhetoric and reveals the process to be a disciplinary tool in the production of ‘governable persons’ – that is, ‘a person whose activities can be accounted for at the micro-level
and implicitly a person whose sincerity and integrity – or to put it another way, whose trustworthiness – cannot be taken for granted’ (pp. 100–1).

6. On this issue, I found the paper by Miller and Morgan (1993) to be extremely useful. Also, see Humphreys (2005).

7. Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) is the inspectorate for children and learners in England. According to their official website:

   It is our job to contribute to the provision of better education and care through effective inspection and regulation. We achieve this through a comprehensive system of inspection and regulation covering childcare, schools, colleges, children’s services, teacher training and youth work. Each week, we carry out hundreds of inspections and regulatory visits, helping professionals in education and childcare make a difference to the lives of children and young people. We are a non-ministerial government department accountable to Parliament. Our independence means you can rely on us for impartial information about the quality of education and care (http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/).

8. Leonard Norman Cohen was born in Montreal, PQ, in 1934. His first collection of poetry, Let Us Compare Mythologies, was published in 1956, while he was still an undergraduate. The Spice Box Of Earth (1961), his second collection, catapulted Cohen to international recognition. However, just as Cohen’s poetry began gaining attention in international literary circles, he was already changing genres. In the midst of work on a third book of poems – 1964’s contentious Flowers for Hitler – the poet turned his attention to writing novels. His seven-year stay on the Greek island of Hydra resulted in two celebrated novels: The Favorite Game and Beautiful Losers. A little more than a year after the publication of the latter, Cohen once again switched genres, this time turning to music. Songs of Leonard Cohen, his first album, was released in 1968, containing the classic Suzanne. Since then, he has released 16 more albums, the most recent being Dear Heather in 2004 (http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5811).

9. In 1994, Cohen said:

   If you’re going to think of yourself in this game, or in this tradition, and you start getting a swelled head about it, then you’ve really got to think about who you’re talking about. You’re not just talking about Randy Newman, who’s fine, or Bob Dylan, who’s sublime, you’re talking about King David, Homer, Dante, Milton, Wordsworth, you’re talking about the embodiment of our highest possibility. So I don’t think it’s particularly modest or virtuous to think of oneself as a minor poet. I really do feel the enormous luck I’ve had in being able to make a living, and to never have had to have written one word that I didn’t want to write... But I don’t fool myself, I know the game I’m in. When I wrote about Hank Williams’ A hundred floors above me in the tower of song, it’s not some kind of inverse modesty. I know where Hank Williams stands in the history of popular song. Your Cheatin’ Heart, songs like that, are sublime, in his own tradition, and I feel myself a very minor writer. I’ve taken a certain territory, and I’ve tried to maintain it and administrate it with the very best of my capacities. And I will continue to administrate this tiny territory until I’m too weak to do it. But I understand where this territory is. (http://arts.guardian.co.uk/fridayreview/story/0,,1305765,00.html).
10. With regard to *Anthem* (1992) and his use of the phrase ‘There is a crack, a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in’, Cohen later said: ‘That’s the closest thing I could describe to a credo. That idea is one of the fundamental positions behind a lot of the songs’ (http://arts.guardian.co.uk/fridayreview/story/0,,1305765,00.html).

11. For example, Bagley and Cancienne (2002); Bochner and Ellis (2003); Clough (2002); Goodley et al. (2004); Ellis and Bochner (1996); Richardson (1997, 2000); Tierney and Lincoln (1997). Also see the recent defence mounted by Denzin (2006) and Ellis and Bochner (2006).


REFERENCES


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